

Letter 138
Brussels, 1 November 1880
72 Boulevard du Midi

Dear Theo,

In answer to your letter I will tell you a few things.

First, I went to see Mr. Roelofs the day after receiving your letter. He told me that in his opinion from now on I must draw principally from nature, that is, from either plaster cast or model, but not without the guidance of someone who knows it well. He – and others too – have advised me so earnestly to go and work at the academy, either here or in Antwerp or wherever I can, that I felt obliged to try to get admitted to the said academy, though I don't think it so very pleasant.

Here in Brussels the teaching is free of charge (in Amsterdam, for instance, I hear it costs 100 guilders a year) and one can work in a well-heated and well-lighted room, which is good, especially in winter.

I get on very well with the Barges, I am making progress.

Besides that, lately I have been busy drawing something that took a lot of work, but still I am glad I have done it: I drew a rather large-sized skeleton with pen and ink on five sheets of Ingres paper.

1 page: the head, bones and muscle.

1 page: the torso, bones.

1 page: the hand, front view, bones and muscle.

1 page: the hand, back view, bones and muscle.

1 page: the pelvis and legs, bones.

I got the idea of making these from a textbook by John: Sketches of the anatomy for artist's use. There are some reproductions in it which seem to me very good and clear, of the hand, the foot, etc. etc. And what I am going to do now is finish drawing the muscles, that is, of the torso and the legs, which with the others will form the whole of the human body. Then follows the back and side view of the body. So you see, I am going ahead with a will: these things are not so easy – they take time and a great deal of patience besides. In order to be admitted to the academy of drawing one must have the Mayor's permission and be registered. I am waiting for the answer to my request. I know quite well that no matter how economically or poorly one may live, life here in Brussels must be more expensive; but I cannot get on without some instruction, and I think if only I work hard, which I do, possibly Uncle Vincent or Uncle Cor will do something – if not to help me, at least to help Father.

From the veterinarian school I intend to get pictures of the anatomy, for instance, of a horse, a cow, or sheep, and draw them the way I did the anatomy of the human body.

There are laws of proportion, of light and shadow, of perspective, which one must know in order to be able to draw well; without that knowledge, it always remains a fruitless struggle, and one never creates anything. Therefore I think I was right in acting as I did, and this winter I will try to lay in some capital of anatomy; I cannot put it off any longer – in the end it would prove more expensive, for it would be loss of time.

I believe this will also be your point of view.

It is a hard and difficult struggle to learn to draw well.

If I might find some permanent work here, so much the better; but I dare not count on it, for I still have many things to learn.

Have also been to see Mr. Van Rappard, who now lives at Rue Traversière 6a, and had a talk with him. He is a fine-looking man; of his work I saw only a few pen-and-ink drawings of landscapes. But judging from the way he lives he must be quite wealthy, and I do not know whether he is the person with whom someone like me could live and work, for financial reasons. But I certainly shall go and see him again some time. He impressed me as one who takes things seriously.

In Cuesmes, boy, I should have fallen ill with misery, if I had stayed a month longer. You must not imagine that I live richly here, for my chief food is dry bread or some potatoes or chestnuts which people sell here on the street corners, but by having a somewhat better room and by occasionally taking a somewhat better meal in a restaurant whenever I can afford it, I shall get on very well. But for almost two years I have had a hard time in the Borinage – it was no pleasure trip, I assure you. The expenses here will be somewhat more than 60 fr., which cannot be helped. Drawing materials, studies to copy – for instance, for anatomy – all cost money, and yet they are strictly necessary: only in this way shall I obtain a fair return, otherwise I could never succeed.

The other day I read with great pleasure an extract from the work of Lavater and Gall, Physiognomy and Phrenology, namely, how character is expressed in the features and in the shape of the skull. I have drawn "The Diggers" by Millet, from a Braun photograph which I found at Schmidt's and which he lent me, together with that of "The Angelus." I sent both these drawings to Father so he might see I am working. Write again soon, address 72 Bd. Du Midi. I am here in a small hotel for 50 fr. a month, including my bread and a cup of coffee morning, afternoon and evening. That is not very cheap, but it is expensive everywhere. Those Holbeins in The Models from the Masters are splendid. Now that I am drawing them, I feel it even more strongly than before. But I assure you, they are not easy.

When I went to see Mr. Schmidt, I hadn't the slightest idea that he was involved in a money question which concerned the Van Gogh family, for which reason he, Mr. Schmidt, was going to be sued; I only learned it from your letter. So that was rather bad luck, though I must say Mr. Schmidt received me rather cordially. But since I do know it now and things are the way they are, it will perhaps be wise not to go there often, though I do not see the necessity of avoiding him intentionally.

I should have written sooner, but was too busy with my skeleton. I believe the longer you think it over, the more you will see the urgent necessity of more artistic surroundings for me – how can one learn to draw if nobody shows one how? With all the best intentions in the world, one cannot succeed without coming into contact with artists who are more advanced. Good intentions alone are not sufficient without some opportunity for development.

As to your thinking I should not want to be among the mediocre artists, what shall I say? it quite depends on what you call mediocre. I shall do what I can, but I do not at all despise mediocre in its simple sense. And one certainly does not rise above the mark by despising what is mediocre. In my opinion one must at least begin by having some respect for the mediocre, and know that it already means something, and is only reached with great difficulty.

Adieu, for the present, I shake hands with you in thought. Write soon if possible,
Vincent